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THE MAAGDENHUIS OCCUPATION, THE CRISIS OF 'SOFT COUPLING' AND THE NEW UNIVERSITY

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When the University of Amsterdam (UvA) announced its plans to re-structure the faculty of humanities in Autumn 2014, university managers apparently expected these plans to be reluctantly accepted as the best way to adapt to challenging times¹. UvA's humanities faculty had been actively engaged with developing an excellence plan for Humanities in the Netherlands (under the oversight of the *Regieorgaan Geesteswetenschappen*). Indeed, UvA's announced plans were broadly in line with the *Regieorgaan*'s vision of further specialising and profiling humanities teaching and research provision between Dutch universities. In a country whose small size has become a near-national obsession, it was self-evidently unreasonable – unaffordable – for every university to try to maintain excellence in all areas of humanities. From this perspective, rationalisation would further build critical mass, benefit teaching and research provision, and generate economies of scale via efficient provision. In short, the plan Dean Van Vree presented (*Profile 2016*) was – at least from the managers' perspective – the best way to position UvA given falling student numbers, and was despite initial pain, a 'win-win' scenario².

But substantial opposition quickly emerged not only to the plan, but also to the absence of effective consultation upon whom it was imposed, those who would experience its most dramatic effects, namely students and

non-tenured staff³. Technically, it was not 'imposed', because the UvA did indeed possess comprehensive 'co-determination' structures involving staff and students (*medezeggenschap*) at faculty and university levels. However, discussions in these bodies made this co-determination's limits clear⁴: financial restrictions framed so many things as 'non-negotiable' that the plan as a whole was effectively non-negotiable. To university managers, the Humanities Faculty was small, with falling student numbers, and cutting costs to compensate for its predicted falling future income was inevitable. Financialization in the university made the logic of allocation and deduction models unquestionable despite the fact that the faculty's financial crisis was entirely the result of a modelling technology process imposed from within UvA (cf. Engelen *et al.* 2014). But to staff and students that apparent inevitability was artificial, arising from many small prior university choices: budgets were determined by a faculty financial allocation model, and from that centrally imposed faculty overheads must be paid.

The apparently unchallengeability of highly contingent university decisions led to frustration, leading to direct action. It is the claimed irresistibility of these financial framings in these spreadsheet models to which can be ascribed the Bungehuis and Maagdenhuis occupations. Protestors demanded a right to challenge managers' strategically deployed calculative technologies rather than merely express *ex post* regret over these externally imposed plans. These occupations also struck a chord with other European universities, eliciting interest in and solidarity for these protests from a variety of fronts, highlighting the urgency of the problem⁵. The occupations are symptomatic of university managers' more general failures to understand that trumping co-determination and discussion with calculative technologies was a failure of the idea of university democracy. Protestors have advanced the idea of the 'new university' as a neat solution to this failure of democracy⁶. In this paper I argue that this democratic problem can further be illuminated as a problem of soft-coupling. The characteristic of soft-coupling is essential for the university to carry out its key tasks of creating, disseminating, storing, challenging, critiquing and debunking knowledge for society. Reflecting on the Maagdenhuis occupation through this lens, I identify three key questions that the notion of

the new university must address to allow universities to best function as a learning community and thus contribute to societal development.

The University of Amsterdam and its Humanities Crisis

I firstly place this crisis in perspective by conceptually distinguishing four distinctive kinds of financialized framings that concatenated in UvA via *Profile 2016*'s unchallengeable rationale. Firstly were novel Dutch higher education funding approaches in the 1980s, with universities given block grants on an output basis, reflecting student numbers, student completions and Ph.D. completions⁷. University Executive Boards were completely freed from government in spending their allocations and were *initially* overseen by elected Councils with powers of veto (scrapped in 1998). Where mechanical allocations threatened to irreparably damage the Dutch science base, the government funded discipline-wide action plans, where groups of departments/faculties developed multi-annual strategic investment programmes filling the gaps left by 'task allocation/concentration' and 'selective shrinkage/growth'.

Secondly, Dutch government real estate management practices changed in 1994, the ownership of increasingly antiquated campus estates passed from university boards; the costs of replacing and upgrading this estate totalled billions of guilders, costs which universities could not immediately cover from their reserves, making real estate management a core task. UvA's existing sites mixed dilapidated semi-permanent peri-urban buildings with city-centre prime real estate. UvA planned rationalisation around four core locations, selling-off surplus sites and negotiating long-term loans from a range of financiers demanding solvency and liquidity covenants (Engelen 2014). UvA's Executive Board thereby became fiducially responsible for upholding these covenants, making institutional liquidity and solvency an urgent management concern.

Thirdly, Dutch humanities had been framed as 'problematic', with few students, and staff whose research excellence is difficult to gauge using traditional measures – research grants and publication numbers. 1980s

changes to university financing severely disadvantaged the humanities, threatening modern languages in the 1980s with extinction. The Government of the day established a Commission to strategically invest to rationalise and strengthen the humanities (Staal 1987; Van Delft 1994). But the problems were more intractable than one Commission could solve, and at least three more Commissions (Gerritsen, Vonhoff and Cohen) pored over the same question. Humanities' survival, particularly more traditional humanities, became politically dependent on governmental favour granting these disciplines respite from other science system pressures.

Finally was the permeation of excellence and competitive norms into academic life, the belief taking hold that efficiency demanded resources only be allocated to those adjudged to be 'excellent' in comparison to others. A growing set of technologies and techniques emerged for measuring and comparing 'excellence', routinizing and abstracting allocation systems that were often initially quite *ad hoc* and opportunistic decisions. These technologies constructed an allure that they were capable of taking the 'correct decision' and distinguishing the 'unworthy loser', framing losers by definition as not excellent and therefore undeserving of resources. Whether it was an unfunded professor, a researcher made unemployed, a department facing closure or students losing their courses, the dark side of competition was in condemning losers as deserving their fate without right of appeal.

These various framings emerged over thirty years starting with the 1982 TVC funding reforms, then codified into decisions made at the national level, in Parliament, in government, in university administration, in faculty bodies, in higher education sector bodies and agreed with financiers. Students were reframed from being critical participants in university knowledge communities into a source of income to be managed efficiently. This was reinforced in the case of UvA Executive Board's fiduciary obligations to their financiers to maintain solvency and liquidity. Humanities' existing special treatment through the *Regieorgaan Geesteswetenschappen* framed further special interest pleading as unfair and unacceptable. Finally, the restructuring plan was justified as a response to the fact that humanities was unworthy of support because of falling student numbers and

low research income, a fact not subject to appeal, even where the rules seemed manifestly unfair.

When you are styled as generating insufficient income for the financiers' needs, as already being treated with kid gloves, not excellent, and with no right to challenge these 'facts' democratically, then democratic co-determination seems worthless. And it was the realisation of precisely that situation that triggered the direct action protests of Spring 2015.

The Maagdenhuis occupation as a crisis of 'soft coupling'

Advocates of university 'modernisation' – a modish shorthand referring to the desirability of financializing, centralising and standardising higher education – regularly invoke 'ivory tower' metaphors to justify their interventions. Left to its own devices, left to governance by academics, they argue, the academy will turn into itself and stop concerning itself with matters of public interest. This simplistic idea has evolved into a ubiquitous Whiggish higher education discourse that the past university was an Ivory Tower and the 'modernisation process' heralds a bright, entrepreneurial age demanding the university realise its true potential to drive societal development in the era of 'cognitive capitalism' (Kloosterman 2010). The university must (be remade to) function as a site of cognitive capital accumulation, capital to be harnessed by society's entrepreneurial heroes in business life.

Attractive as these somewhat simplistic discourses are, they belie a basic reality of the university, which is arguably, after the established church, the oldest Western societal institution still in substantive existence. This longevity can in turn be ascribed to the ways that universities meet – and have always met – societal needs. It was a Pope who populated the University of Paris using Prebendary Stipends as a centralised way of educating a spiritual administrative elite for the Holy See (Rüegg 1992). The big shifts in university organisation were associated with – and were responses to – 'big' societal shifts; the rise of urbanisation and trade saw universities educating temporal as well as spiritual administrators in urban contexts

(Bender 1988); the rise of the nation state after 1648 made universities beacons of national 'high' culture (Benneworth et al. 2009); industrialisation saw the addition of the research task, technological modernisation saw universities educate societies' administrative elites, and the mass university emerged in tandem with mature, reflective democratic societies (Delanty 2002).

But universities do not always exist in a harmonious nature with their host societies. In 17th and 18th century Britain, industrialising society needed more technical knowledge, and the ancient universities rooted in the classic arts and sciences failed to support these new industries. New kinds of institutions emerged, learned societies and technical institutions, to co-ordinate collective knowledge-creating processes (Philipson 1974). New universities emerged through the 19th century (such as University College London or the University of Durham) offering curricula more relevant for the industrial age. But this is not to say that universities always have to bend to society's immediate needs; universities are places where knowledge is created and transferred, but also where existing knowledge can be critiqued, challenged or destroyed. Green politics in Europe today provides a vocabulary and philosophy by which tens of millions of citizens are able to express their values and beliefs in the voting booth, and its origins lie in philosophy professor Arne Næss' reflections. Likewise, unethical anthropologies that justified slavery, colonialism, genocide and racism have been challenged and rejected from the canon as an antecedent to their purging from civilised societal discourse.

Here lies the rub: universities must serve society without being at its direct service; the institution of university has persisted for centuries because it provides this 'utility without subservience'. Universities hold many different kinds of knowledge communities together, different disciplines, different ontologies, different methodologies, different seniorities, different motivations, and build synergies between them. They provide a 'soft-coupling' between these different communities and facilitate the creation, circulation, transfer, disputation and elimination of knowledge (Clark 1986), and soft-coupling is the secret of their success. Soft-coupling involves different scholarly communities (students and staff) co-ordinating together symbiotically without top-down direction and control, based on

mutual respect for each other's talents, values, diversity, interdependency and common interests. Soft-coupling is not merely a latent mutual respect, but is continually reconstituted via interactions enacting and routinizing this respect and tolerance for diversity into community norms. This constructs the university as an intellectual space partly protected from – but still sensitive to – societal pressures: this partial protection allows universities to undertake free-ranging knowledge-creation activities ultimately directly beneficial to society.

But what the UvA case suggests is that the modern university is one where these soft-coupling mechanisms – based on a trust of and respect for diversity – are disappearing. Students have become standardised products to be completed within a set time period for a guaranteed fee. Staff are consumable inputs to this process, individually responsible for ensuring they have the knowledge stocks and funds to cover their own costs. Faculty are tenure who must autonomously generate the income to continually justify their jobs⁸. Humanities becomes another discipline whose staff and students must conform with income generation norms set by more powerful disciplines such as Medicine. Departments become means for implementing standardised business processes to 'keep the academic chimneys smoking', overseen by managers. Notionally to better serve societies' needs, but primarily a direct responsiveness to the demands of the most powerful (the Ministry of Education, the City of Amsterdam, the *Regieorgaan* government policy, the Quality Assurance Agency, Times Higher and Shanghai University Rankings), capacity for loose coupling has been driven out of UvA. Humanities staff and students found themselves declared unwelcome in the university nest without right of reply: the Maagdenhuis occupation is symptomatic of not just a crisis in university democracy (mutual respect) but in 'soft-coupling' (the institutionalisation and internalisation of that mutual respect).

Perspectives on the new university

This special issue seeks to develop perspectives on 'the new university' after the Maagdenhuis occupations. But proposing new university forms is

easy, particularly when the challenges are so obvious, and many supposedly ideal types for 'universities at society's service' have been proposed, whether the enterprise, entrepreneurial or engaged university, the public or civic university or, the democratic university or even the *entrepôt* university (Benneworth 2014). But the crisis of soft-coupling requires universities to do more than be at society's service: to avoid being subservient, they must create spaces for mutual respect and trust, and embody new behavioural principles in all their tasks. This 'new university' idea must rebuild this mutual respect, and rebuild the soft-coupling, raising three critical questions to which the proposed 'new university' must offer convincing answers.

Firstly, how will the university offer a semi-protected space for scholarly communities, for students and staff, where critique and dissent is not mistaken for disloyalty or treason? The irony of the increased autonomy of the late 1990s reforms was in providing managers freedom to act but increased direct governmental interference – pressure to hit targets – driving behaviours at odds with the optimum functioning of knowledge-creation communities (whether running diploma factories, dubious publication practices, or overly applied research for clients). Executive Boards have in turn passed on those interference pressures to their scholarly communities, via financial allocation models mirroring Education Ministries' funding formulae, decoupling management from their communities⁹. What financial headroom there is becomes passed to individuals regarded as best placed to generate immediate returns through excellence. The singular funding formula plus university autonomy therefore together meld into an unquestionable expression of an acceptability norm in higher education, squeezing out difference and imposing uniformity, conformity and orthodoxy. So how will the new university use executive autonomy to respect individuals' freedom to use their creativity without a fear of immediate short-term sanctions for failed creative attempts or for contesting and critiquing existing orthodoxies?

Secondly, how will the 'new university' rebuild a sense of collegiality between staff and students, engender the mutual respect between different kinds of academics and students that this semi-protection requires, to facilitate collective, community activities at the heart of university

knowledge production? If you have spent your adult life building results from experiments, automated data capture and statistical analyses, then the 'research practices' of those reflecting on books, films or the nature of existence can seem anecdotal at best and an unnecessary luxury at worst. If you are highly successful in winning multi-million euro grants and publishing hundreds of articles, then it can seem hard to respect those whose professorial title has been bestowed for writing a handful of books and a few months research leave in an 'Institute of Advanced Studies'. If your students work 40 plus hours a week in laboratories under your doctoral students' direct supervision, then respecting an education where students apparently receive just a couple of lectures and seminars weekly is challenging. How can the new university deal with these differences in norms and legitimacy between knowledge communities/ disciplines, and what kinds of new or revived institutions and practices are required to restore that respect and trust necessary to allow a diversity of practices to flourish?

Thirdly, how can the 'new university' build the necessary solidarity to welcome newcomers into these collective activities, allow acolytes to develop themselves and challenge established ways, thereby ensuring the academic community's long-term vitality. Science has long had a Matthew Principle ('to he who hath shall be given'), recently exacerbated with the pronounced importance of competition, with past competitive success granted a signalling value as an indicator of future promise, thereby encouraging conformity not critique. The Amsterdam protests latched onto the inequality faced by junior staff deemed as of inferior quality in terms of their research outputs and restricted to short-term contracts with no opportunities for career development or improving their impacts, a manifest unfairness – just one manifestation of the increasing absence of solidarity in academe. Institutions such as journals, research councils and learned societies are functioning less as facilitators and development of talent and potential, and more as certifiers and accreditors of winners in the race to individual academic superstardom. There are strong pressures for juniors to conform with and copy these trailblazers, making dissent, heterodoxy and creative thinking too risky for most junior staff. So how will the new university build bridges more generally, not just within its own institutional walls but with learned societies, with journals, with stu-

dent and staff unions, to restore this nurturing function vital to the health of the universities and their ultimate contributions to society?

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² Van Vree, F. (2014) Profile 2016, Faculteit Geesteswetenschap, Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam. Available online at: (Accessed 14th March 2015).

³ For a detailed insider's view of the chronology of events at Het Maagdenhuis see Blau-stein, G. (2015) 'Letter from Amsterdam: humanities, rally!' *N Plus One Magazine Online Only*, 25th March 2015, available online at: <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/letter-from-amsterdam/> (Accessed 25th March 2015).

⁴ Conijn, F. (2015) 'Baas UvA werd operation latere leeftijd hardliner' *Het Financieel Dagblad* 26 February 2015, available online <https://fd.nl/profiel/1094518/baas-uva-wordt-op-latere-leeftijd-hardliner> (Accessed 22nd April 2015).

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/gallery/2015/apr/20/students-worldwide-fight-back-against-commercialisation-of-universities-in-pictures>.

⁶ See for example the blog newuni.nl (De Nieuwe universiteit).

⁷ Here specific reference is being made to two policy rounds, the so-called *Taakverdeling en Concentratie* (TVC, 1981-5) and *Selectieve Krimp en Groei* (SKG, 1987-91), cf Jongbloed & Salerno, 2003.

⁸ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/stefan-grimm-death-prompts-questions-for-imperial-president/2019747.article>

⁹ In the dénouement to the immediate crisis, the UvA President resigned after both Staff and Student representative bodies passed motions of no confidence in the leadership.

¹ Folia Nr. 24, 18/03/2015, p. 6 Available online via <http://www.foliaweb.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Folia-Magazine-24-jaargang-2014-2015.pdf>

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